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Letters to the Editor

Candor, the Press and the President

To the Editor:

In his Jan. 21 Op-Ed article, "Candor Toward the Press," Eric Sevareid asserts that a President has "an inescapable obligation" to hold news conferences "since he cannot be summoned by either Congress or the Court and can, in this age of electronics, argue his case uninterrupted to the whole nation directly, and at times and under circumstances of his own choosing."

Apart from the matter of Presidential news conferences, Mr. Sevareid's concern bears directly on certain well-publicized differences of opinion I have had with these news commentators who share his rather insular view that, save for their expert guidance and interpretation, the American public would be beguiled or misled by the President and other elected officials.

To begin, it should come as something of a surprise to anyone familiar with the U.S. Constitution that an American President cannot be called to accountability by the Congress, the courts or the nation. Indeed, in lieu of the Nielsen or Arbitron ratings to which Mr. Sevareid and his fellow commentators are solely answerable,

a President's accountability for daily decisions and actions to "either Congress . . . the Court" or "the whole nation" is implicit in our constitutional system of checks-and-balances, not to mention the American electoral process.

Plainly, what disturbs Mr. Sevareid then is that a President, on occasion, is able to "argue his own case uninterrupted." This is simply to say that our elected national leader at times exercises the same right in speaking to the people of the country that network commentators enjoy each day.

In this regard, I suggested several months ago that it might make for better public understanding of "the news of the day" if those commentators who interpret events for "the whole nation" were to be interviewed, on a voluntary basis, by knowledgeable persons outside their professional discipline. As I recall, Mr. Sevareid's response to this suggestion was that he has been on-the-air for thirty years and his views are known.

Conceded, unlike the public official, the commentator has the privilege of shunning television interview formats in which he is called to answer rather

than ask questions. Yet it is difficult to forgo an observation that Mr. Sevareid would not for an instant tolerate an evasion such as "my views are known," were a public official to offer this rationale in refusing to appear on C.B.S.'s "Face the Nation."

To be sure, I have never suggested that any member of the news media submit to any form of Government inquisition—though that interpretation was given my remarks by those in the media who suffer the "degree of paranoia" which Mr. Sevareid ascribes to members of the Administration. All I have asked, "in this age of electronics," is that those empowered solely by authority of network-and-sponsor to "argue" their case "uninterrupted to the whole nation directly" perform the valuable public service they demand of all other public spokesmen.

I would hope, therefore, that Mr. Sevareid, as a dean of news commentary, might agree to such a television interview format. He might find, to paraphrase his own conclusion, that a bearing of candor toward those who question his daily expertise will not endanger him or the principle of freedom of the press which we all cherish. In the long run it will reinsure both.

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Washington, Feb. 3, 1971